

Forrest Clingerman, Brian Treanor, Martin Drenthen, and David Utsler (eds.), *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013) ix + 384pp., \$110.00 (cloth) 978-0-8232-5425-5; \$35.00 (paper) 978-0-8232-5426-2.

It is as well to make clear at the start what this collection of essays is not. In no sense is it a contribution to the recent debate in ‘ecological hermeneutics’, strategies for the re-reading of sacred texts in the light of the ecological crisis. Nor is it a practical guide to interpreting the natural world. Rather, these essays debate how the philosophical hermeneutics deriving from theorists such as Ricoeur and Gadamer might be applied to the interpretation of ‘environments’, be they natural or built.

The book had an interesting genesis, in a set of ‘virtual’ seminars conducted in 2010-11 by scholars sensitive to the environmental damage intrinsic to face-to-face international academic meetings. To paraphrase the helpful introduction, what this group of scholars seeks to explore is this (to borrow another trope from Ricoeur): if the nature-writing of visionaries from Thoreau to Muir, Leopold, and Annie Dillard constituted a kind of first naivete of nature-reading (one with explicit ethical designs on the reader), and the phenomenological and constructivist critique of ‘nature’ as always read contextually and critically was the field’s hermeneutic of suspicion, what type of reading, or rather range of types of reading, would constitute a phase of second naivete?

A brief review of this kind cannot engage in depth with all the content of this rich and dense book. The very word ‘nature’ is of course profoundly fraught, as W.S.K. Cameron reminds us in dialogue with the analysis of Steven Vogel.

The first section, ‘Interpretation and the Task of Thinking Environmentally’ reprints an edited version of John van Buren’s 1995 essay setting out a manifesto for environmental hermeneutics. Mick Smith writes interestingly, if critically, about E.O. Wilson’s ‘consilience’ agenda. Christina Gschwandtner asks if nature might be a ‘saturated phenomenon’, in Jean-Luc Marion’s terms, a fascinating question on which I would have been glad of more treatment of the implications. Are there connections to be made here with what Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote about ‘inscape’?

These latter two essays depict poles of the debate, in the sense that the status of the natural sciences is an absolutely key element in all ecological philosophy and theology. Does science (as Wilson would want to claim) provide the determinative facts about biological, including human, nature? Or do we lack any objective perspective from which to give a narrative account of nature, and must we therefore resort to phenomenology to ‘hear’ ourselves ‘telling’ the range of stories we tell, since in the end, however hard we seek to avoid anthropocentrism, it is only we as humans who tell those stories? This question of whether science provides the definitive background for imaginative engagement with the natural world also occupies Michael Treanor later in the book.

The second section is entitled ‘Situating the Self’. In it David Utsler considers whether an environmental theory of the self can help us develop a more authentic theory of human ‘wellness’, ‘the good life [quoting Ricoeur here] “with and for others in just institutions”’ (138). Nathan Bell takes forward this concern, and shows how it might apply to different readings of wilderness – as vast, unsettled possibility, or as wildness to be preserved as a necessary refreshment of the human spirit.

The third section is called ‘Narrativity and Image’, and contains Treanor’s fascinating wrestling with the claims of Jack Turner, on the one hand, to the primacy of lived experience of nature, and Holmes Rolston and Marcia Eaton on the other, insisting on the importance of correct scientific treatments for warding off distorted, Bambi-esque understandings. Treanor himself wants to insist on the central importance of narratives in human imaginative engagement with wild places.

Finally, Forrest Clingerman’s work on memory and imagination in relation to place leads up a section on ‘Environments, Place and the Experience of Time’. Clingerman always writes with clarity and subtlety, and his point that an emphasis on the recovery of the importance of place can lead to a misleadingly static view is well taken. Drawing on Augustine, he wants to insist on the importance of memory – not as mere data storage and retrieval but as individual and community reflecting semiotically on traces of the past. Also, vitally, on the

importance of imagination, of thinking of places as they might be different, were environmental virtues of sustainability, restoration, simplicity to be operative.

There is a brief bibliographic overview at the end. I was sorry not to find in it a whole strand of thinking on relating to nature deriving from Martin Buber and represented more recently by Sallie McFague and Paul Santmire. Reading this text as an ecotheologian reminds me that philosophical hermeneutics, conducted without reference to the divine, will always tend to be ‘anthropo-verted’, bound up in human perceptions, rather than being able to see ‘nature’ as ‘creation’, and as a locus of value quite outside human perception of it. There is a moment in Utsler’s fascinating essay when, quoting Enrique Salmon, he writes, ‘while the Earth has only one voice, it speaks many languages. Yet many of these languages are not heard.’ (131) The echo of Psalm 19 was deafening, yet unarticulated. The paucity of that dimension impoverished, for me, this very thoughtful attempt to provide direction to environmental philosophy.

This book will be of value in particular to students of Ricoeur, Gadamer and their successors interested in extending this thinking into environmental questions. And it will help those, like Paul van Tongeren and Paulien Snellen in the last essay, who think environmental ethics, or environmental philosophy more generally, might need rescuing. It does require significant sophistication in the reader, and in classroom use would be most suitable for Masters-level students.